



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718

July 27, 2017

To whom it may concern:

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and the Custer-Gallatin National Forest are proceeding with a project to restore Westslope Cutthroat Trout (WCT) to North Fork Spanish Creek upstream of a constructed fish barrier located on private land. Native WCT would be restored to 17 miles of upper North Fork Spanish Creek, a tributary to the Gallatin River. WCT would also be restored to two high mountain lakes within the North Fork Spanish Creek basin, Chiquita Lake, and Big Brother Lake. Construction of a fish barrier and removal of non-native brook trout, rainbow trout, and Yellowstone cutthroat trout with rotenone, an EPA registered piscicide, would more than double the number of WCT occupied miles of stream in the Gallatin River drainage. WCT necessary for recolonization would be sourced from the last three existing populations in the Gallatin River drainage and/or from the two remaining native populations in the Madison drainage.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared and circulated for public comment from April 25, 2017, to May 25, 2017. A scoping letter, which included a project summary and link to the EA, was mailed to concerned citizens, conservation groups, non-governmental organizations, governmental organizations, and tribal governments. Copies of the EA were made available at the State Library in Helena, FWP Region 3 Headquarters in Bozeman MT, and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks web site. On April 25, the proposed project and EA were provided to the Bozeman Daily Chronicle and published as a notice. On May 17, a full article was published in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle describing the project and providing contact details. No comments were received on the Environmental Assessment.

Based on the Environmental Assessment, the lack of comments received, and the benefits and risks associated with this project, it is my decision to go forward with the proposed action of removal of non-native trout in upper North Fork Spanish Creek drainage, followed by replication of WCT from the last remaining populations in the Gallatin Drainage. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environment associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analyses, and have approved the following Decision Notice to proceed with the project.

Questions regarding this Decision Notice should be mailed to:

Dave Moser
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1400 S. 19th Ave
Bozeman, MT 59718
Or e-mailed to: davemoser@mt.gov

Sincerely,

Shirley Swecker
Acting Region 3 Supervisor



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Notice of Decision

for

Westslope Cutthroat Trout Restoration in North Fork Spanish Creek Gallatin River Drainage

**Region 3
1400 South 19th Ave
Bozeman, MT 59718**

July 27, 2017

Project Proposal and Justification:

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and the Custer-Gallatin National Forest are proposing to restore Westslope Cutthroat Trout (WCT) to North Fork Spanish Creek upstream of a constructed fish barrier. The fish barrier, a concrete structure, will reside on private land. After construction of the fish barrier and removal of non-native fishes, native WCT would be restored to 17 miles of upper North Fork Spanish Creek, a tributary to the Gallatin River. WCT would also be restored to two high mountain lakes within the North Fork Spanish Creek basin, Chiquita and Big Brother lakes. Construction of a fish barrier and removal of non-native brook trout, rainbow trout, and Yellowstone cutthroat trout with rotenone, an EPA registered piscicide, is necessary to prevent extinction of the last remaining pure population of WCT in the Gallatin River drainage. WCT necessary for recolonization would be sourced from the original population of WCT and from several small populations replicated in other drainages in previous years. If necessary, nearest neighbor populations in the Madison River drainage could be used as well.

FWP is required by law (§87-1-201(9)(a) Montana Code Annotated [MCA]) to implement programs that manage sensitive fish species in a manner that assists in the maintenance or recovery of those species, and that prevents the need to list the species under § 87-5-107 MCA or the federal Endangered Species Act. Section 87-1-201(9)(a), M.C.A.

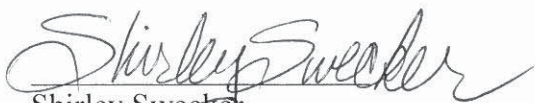
FWP is a signatory to the Memorandum of Understanding and Conservation Agreement for WCT in Montana (FWP 1999, 2007) which states: "The management goal for WCT in Montana is to ensure the long-term, self-sustaining persistence of the subspecies within each of the five

major river drainages they historically inhabited in Montana, and to maintain genetic diversity and life history strategies represented by the remaining local populations.”

According to the FWP Statewide Fisheries Management Plan, the restoration goal for WCT east of the Continental Divide (Upper Missouri River Basin upstream from and including the Judith River) is to restore secure conservation populations of WCT to 20% of their historic distribution (FWP 2012). Populations of WCT are considered secure by FWP when they are isolated from non-native fishes, typically by a physical fish passage barrier, have a population size of at least 2,500 fish, and occupy sufficient (5 to 6 miles) habitat to assure long-term persistence, all descriptors of this project. Currently WCT (including slightly hybridized populations > 90% WCT) occupy approximately 8% of their historic habitat range-wide and approximately 1% of their historic range in the Gallatin River drainage.

Decision:

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and the current risk of extinction of genetically pure westslope cutthroat trout in the Gallatin River drainage, it is my decision to proceed with Alternative 2, the proposed action. Alternative 2 involves removal of non-native fish populations and establishment of a pure, locally derived, population of westslope cutthroat trout. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal. This alternative provides the best opportunity to benefit the conservation and restoration of westslope cutthroat trout, helps relieve potential Endangered Species Act listing pressure, and serves to illustrate the State’s commitment to perpetuating native fish species. This project will help preserve westslope cutthroat trout in the North Fork Spanish Creek Drainage by replicating one or more of the few remaining populations of WCT remaining in the Gallatin or Madison rivers and expanding the overall range of WCT by 17 miles. I find there to be no significant impact on the human or physical environment associated with this project except to help ensure the long-term persistence of pure, locally adapted Westslope Cutthroat Trout in the Two Medicine Drainage. Therefore, I conclude the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



Shirley Swecker
Acting Region 3 Supervisor

Bozeman, Montana

